

Graduate Degree Program Strategic Assessment: **American Studies Fall 2009**

Mission: American Studies trains interdisciplinary scholars who synthesize and interpret American cultural forms of expression and the processes and implications of social change in historical and contemporary manifestations. American Studies addresses questions of race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and gender as well as American culture in an international context. Our focus relies on the belief that perspectives of American life, history, and values from various points of view both outside and inside the continental US are central to understanding American matters and culture holistically.

Students prepare for academic careers in colleges and universities as well as for comparable positions at libraries and archives, museums, historic sites, non-profit organizations, scholarly publishers, and other cultural institutions. Training in American Studies provides integration and strategic focus within a lengthy self-reflective tradition of synthetic cultural theories and methods for treating the variety of materials and approaches from different disciplines. In short, by fusing the disparate liberal arts areas that independently and separately focus on arts analysis, language and culture, or processes of social change, American Studies is the vital “heart” of the liberal arts.

Central role in the University’s core missions: Since American Studies graduate students work within a cohesive cluster of disciplines, they undergird UI’s core teaching mission as cross-disciplinary teachers who excel in the instructional demands of several GER courses, including Rhetoric, General Education Literature, American Studies, Native American Studies, and Sexuality Studies. American Studies includes outreach and public engagement experiences, especially with UI and regional museums and historic sites. In addition, the American Studies graduate program both formally and informally participates in international outreach through faculty and student exchange programs, the USIA and Fulbright programs, and selective admissions. The program’s role in University basic research is key: cross-disciplinary connections occur regularly through faculty joint appointments, cross-listed graduate courses, graduate examination committees, regular extracurricular activities with broad inter-departmental participation, and graduate proseminars that include faculty and graduate students from multiple departments. When scarce resources must be divided between traditions of learning and path-breaking avenues for what knowledge will be in the future, American Studies has for 70 years been located at the intersection between the two, serving as the focal point for imagining a holistic culture and for protecting radical ideas that challenge that holistic image.

Admissions Processes and Criteria: The Department offers the MA and the PhD. Since 2004, the Department has not actively admitted students into a terminal MA program.* Most MAs are awarded *en passant* to PhD students upon completing their comprehensive examinations or to students who change degree objective from PhD to MA and complete a written Master’s examination and 36 s.h. of coursework.

*The exceptions are the 4 Master’s students (2004-08) who were participants in a University exchange program with Dortmund University; the future of this exchange beyond 2009-10 is uncertain.

Basic criteria for PhD admission: undergraduate GPA above 3.0; good verbal & analytical GRE scores; strong liberal arts training with courses in American history or other American subjects; evidence of interdisciplinary training and habits of mind; scholarly potential and individual maturity. Preferred criteria include: MA degree from a terminal MA program in American Studies; significant post-baccalaureate experience relevant to degree areas, e.g. secondary school teaching, professional employment, and/or living abroad. Since 2004, the Department has increasingly admitted only students who meet all basic criteria and at least one of the preferred admissions criteria.

Student demand: The number of applications has shrunk: 51 (04); 34 (05); 42 (06); 42 (07); 33 (08). However, the overall quality of the applications remains high; selection bears this out with American Studies GRE scores above UI humanities (from 33-53 points for 02-07 data tables) and well above national humanities (154-166 points).

Success in enrolling the highest quality students admitted and a diverse student cohort: American Studies ranks high among UI humanities programs for graduate fellowships awarded and highest for successful recruitment.

Presidential Fellows, 2004-08

Dept.	Offered	Accepted	Percent Accepted
American Studies	12	8	75%
Comm. Studies	17	5	29%
English	28	10	36%
History	15	6	40%

The 2004-2008 data is consistent with the data from 1995-2006; in addition, the programs whose numbers are comparable enroll much larger cohorts.

Dean's Fellows, PhD only, 2004-08

Dept	Offered	Accepted	Percent Accepted
American Studies	4	3	75%
Comm. Studies	8	4	50%
English	21	15	72%
History	9	2	22%
Philosophy	4	3	75%
Spanish	4	2	50%

The graduate student cohort is at least 50% female; students represent a range of class, ethnic, regional backgrounds as well as age and sexual orientation diversity. From 1993-2003, we graduated 7 PhDs who are minorities; 2 international students; from 2004-2009, we graduated 1 PhD who is a minority; 2 international students. Currently, the program enrolls 7 minority students; 2 international students.

Financial aid commitments: The Department commits 5 years of financial aid to entering students. Students TA in: American Studies, Rhetoric, Sexuality Studies, and GEL. Many are appointed in Rhetoric or GEL and subsequently in American Studies. Students who have American Studies MAs with prior TA experience may be placed directly into American Studies. TAs typically first assist in large lecture courses, subsequently receive Rhetoric or GEL appointments, and then teach single section courses in American Studies.

Program Outcomes:

Degree completion and time-to-degree:

PhD degree completion rate (May 2008) for those who entered 1996-2000 is 24%. While this is the lowest of UI humanities departments, American Studies also has the highest rate (28%) of students who changed degree objective to the MA (another 28% left without any degree). Internal data revealed that most who changed degree objective were recent BAs; with this information in hand, we are beginning to address degree completion rates (see below). *Time to degree* since 2003 (n=10) is a median of 8.6. (Time-to-degree 01-07 (n=12) was a median of 9.0.) The number remains comparable to History's larger sample (n=28) and median of 9.4. The time-to-degree rate for American Studies PhDs nationally is 8-9 years.** For American Studies students, dissertation research/writing is comparable to History, and American Studies students must also master more than one disciplinary skill. *Improving both degree completion rates and time-to-degree is a top American Studies priority, and the Department is a participant in our national professional association's programs for how to reduce the national average time to six years.* Two strategies we implemented in 08-09: (1) greater admissions selectivity for preferred criteria in order to reduce the least successful population; (2) removed dissertation prospectus requirement of an annotated bibliography, as redundant, in order to improve time-to-degree from comprehensive examinations to dissertation defense. In 09-10, we are also planning new strategies for improved mentoring of 1st-2nd year students and ABD students, the two populations whose success rates we believe can be effectively changed.

**NRC reports median time to degree in American Studies 2003-2006 for the following peer institutions: University of Michigan: 8.1; University of Minnesota 7.7; University of Maryland: 9.3; George Washington University: 7.8.

Graduate student fellowships, awards, honors:

American Studies graduate students are among the most successful at UI in competing for College dissertation fellowships as well as for TA Awards, external honors, and fellowships. Since 2003, they have received 6 Ballard-Seashore Fellowships, 2 Cleary Fellowships, and 10 Graduate College Summer Fellowships. Since 2003, American Studies students have won at least 25 external fellowships, grants, and awards from professional associations and foundations, including prestigious national fellowships from the American Association of University Women (2), the Javits Fellowship, and the Consortium for Faculty Diversity. Since 2003, 4 American Studies TAs have won University TA awards. An American Studies student just won the 2009 D. C. Priestestersbach Dissertation Prize.

Publications:

Of the 38 PhDs who have graduated since 1997, 12 have either published books or have book contracts to publish revised versions of their dissertations with major university presses.

PhD Placements, 1997-2009:

University Positions	Postdoc Fellows	Cultural Institution Prof. Positions	Unreported	Unemployed	Deceased	Total	Placement rate
25	2	2	6	2	1	38	79%

University Positions	Tenured or Tenure Track	University Administration	Non-Tenure Track (includes community colleges)
25 Total:	11	9	5

Program Characteristics:

Comparison to other programs: There are approximately 35 American Studies doctorate programs. The NRC will rank these programs for the first time in their soon-to-be-released assessment. During our 2003 Department review, external reviewers concurred with our assessment that Iowa ranks in the top 10 doctoral programs although probably in the second half. Iowa ranks with or even just above Maryland, Texas, George Washington, and Emory. Iowa is just below and aspires to compete nationally with Minnesota and Michigan. But, as is typical at Iowa, we have fewer faculty than the peer institutions just listed. We believe we are stronger than our general reputation indicates, and we may be more visible in some regions of the world than in the U.S.: we have strong ties to peer programs and professional associations in the Netherlands, Eastern Europe, and England.

Size: Current enrollment: 40 PhD; 2 MA. The Department has averaged 38 PhD students for the last 6 years. We plan to decrease enrollment to the middle-30s by 2011-12 through annually awarding more degrees than the number of new students enrolled. Given our role in CLAS GER courses, number of fellows, current faculty FTE of 5.88, and the fact that all our students also work with cooperating faculty from other departments, we believe this target is an appropriate scale for current and anticipated resources.

Faculty Resources and Strengths: American Studies faculty strength focuses on (1) the broad range of popular culture and the arts (literature, visual arts, film, theater, popular music, and photography) over several centuries, also a strength at UI generally, and on (2) understanding cultural diversity. Faculty represent a range of approaches and applications in this regard: feminist and queer theories, internationalist views, and ethnic studies. Currently, faculty hold joint appointments with: African American Studies, Cinema and Comparative Literature, English, Health and Sport Studies, Religion, and Theatre Arts.

Current Strengths and Weaknesses of the Department: American Studies represents an important intellectual center for humanities and social sciences graduate students and faculty studying American culture and its impact on the world. Beyond a curriculum that draws students from many majors, American Studies routinely sponsors extra-curricular events that bring together faculty and graduate students. American Studies also houses the Center for Ethnic Studies and the Arts, an interdisciplinary research center that sponsors speakers, proseminars, research workshops, and conferences that draw faculty and graduate student participants from many departments. These events are not only rich intellectual exchanges but have prepared graduate students for publication, for networking with respected senior scholars, and for professional participation in national and international conferences.

Opportunities for Growth and/or Reorganization to Improve Excellence: Beginning in Fall 2009, American Studies houses the American Indian and Native American Studies Program, and we are in the process of moving into a formal administrative partnership with Museum Studies. Closer relationships with both programs will strengthen curricular and extracurricular offerings in ethnic studies and museum studies as well as enable new graduate student internships in museum studies, important training for public engagement activities and professional placement.

Conclusions: American Studies is a strong PhD program, with among the most impressive achievement records of any UI humanities program. It is in the top ten of American Studies PhD programs nationally. It is a rigorous program, and although retention and attrition need to be addressed, those who do matriculate successfully are some of UI's most successful graduate students and become accomplished professionals. (1) Like most UI departments, we have insufficient numbers of faculty when compared with peer institutions. (2) Current reorganization with AINSP and Museum Studies will strengthen important foci within the PhD program. (3) We must improve degree completion rates and time-to-degree. With resources so tight, we want to focus on and advance our track record at turning out exceptionally strong PhDs, who are successful in both academia and public humanities institutions.